

# A ‘Dreadful Conjunction of Appearances’: Superficial Observation in *The Pickwick Papers*

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This paper analyses Pickwick’s and Sam Weller’s superficial observation in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*. Pickwick’s ‘scientific’ attention focuses only on the surface of life. His immature understanding of the world blinds him to life’s understanding reality. The legal professionals’ way of accusing Pickwick is the wicked counterpart to Pickwick’s observation. Analysed in a similar manner to his, Pickwick is punished for his superficiality, and learns the proper way of observation through imprisonment in the Fleet. Conversely, Sam’s superficial observation adds another layer to the novel, as he deconstructs the life lessons Pickwick learns from his painful experiences. Sam’s limited “wisdom” saves the jovial atmosphere of the novel itself from submitting to the grimness of reality.

**Key Words** : English literature, Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, superficial observation, vision

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## I. Introduction

In his review of *Our Mutual Friend*, Henry James calls Charles Dickens “the greatest of superficial novelists,” who prefers describing the appearance of things in detail, rather than “seeing beneath the surface of things.” Claiming that Dickens disregards the exploration of

characters' subtle, innermost emotions not revealed in their outward appearances, James confines Dickens "to an inferior rank in the department of letters" (786-87). Putting aside the argument about his qualification as one of the greatest novelists, superficiality is not a weakness in Dickens' works. As early as *Sketches by Boz*, the collection of his earliest sketches, Dickens characterises Boz the narrator as a superficial observer. In the opening of "Shops and Their Tenants," Boz cries, "What inexhaustible food for speculation do the streets of London afford!" (61). It is not observation itself but "speculation" that amuses him. When observing the door knockers of the houses in another sketch, he somehow thinks that "there will inevitably be a greater or less degree of resemblance and sympathy" (41) between the knockers and their owners, and begins to imagine what kind of people live in these houses. Whether his speculation proves to be true is not his prime concern. Rather, he enjoys the wild visions welling up one after another in his mind. For Boz, the objects he observes trigger deviation from the sober scenes of daily life into a world of fancy. Boz's observation can be regarded as superficial in that it is not an attempt to detect the truth underlying appearances.

In this paper, I probe Dickens effectively applies Boz's superficial observation to *The Pickwick Papers* (cited as *PP* from hereon), which Dickens started serialising while writing a series of sketches. G. K. Chesterton wrote that Pickwick's "god-like gullibility" is "the key to all adventures" (50). Similarly, W. H. Auden saw Pickwick as a resident of Eden "who has not eaten of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (408). Since then, Pickwick has been regarded as a symbol of innocence. Apparently, Pickwick is a superficial observer who cannot see "beneath the surface of things." During the latter half of the novel, he is gradually "exposed or belittled in the face of a practical reality" (Levine 47). *PP* seemingly shows how Pickwick's superficiality is corrected. Pickwick, however, is not a character who inherits Boz's way of seeing. Through the studies of Pickwick, the legal professionals, and Sam Weller, I would like to argue that Sam is a successor of Boz, and that Dickens attempts to illustrate the proper working of superficial observation through Sam's interpretation of the world.

## II. Pickwick as a "Humbug": His 'Scientific' Observation

Let us first analyse Pickwick's 'scientific' approach. Dickens does not represent Pickwick as a pure, innocent man from the beginning. Rather, he attempts to make the reader laugh at the old man's pedantry. *PP* begins with a parody of a meeting of scientists. Since Dickens had noticed the comic potential in the recently published reports of the speeches and activities of

scientific associations (Slater 65), he chose to characterise Pickwick as an amateur scientist.<sup>1</sup> As is illustrated of Gulliver's description of the residents of Laputa and Walter Shandy's persistence in pseudo-scientific theories, the parody of science was quite popular among the satirists during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Dickens stresses the absurdity of this meeting basically by following the science-satirising tradition.

At the opening of the assembly, it is reported that Pickwick's thesis, entitled "Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with Some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats" (15) has received enthusiastic praise. Although the contents of his thesis are not revealed, Mark Wormald suggests that the title could be an imitation of John Hill's satire of a paper by William Arderon in 1747, entitled "'Observations' to the Royal Society 'on Banstickle, or Prickelbag, alias Prickleback, and also Fish in General'" (775). Given the close resemblances between the titles of Arderon's and Pickwick's, Dickens, like Hill, appears to mock the triviality of Pickwick's studies.<sup>3</sup> Pickwick has a sense of mission "to benefit the human race" (17) with his research, which receives passionate admiration from among the members of the Club. In this respect, too, the first chapter satires science.

The title of Pickwick's paper, especially the word "speculation," should not be overlooked. G. H. Lewes, one of the most renowned intellectuals in Dickens' time, explained what scientific speculation involved at that time. According to Lewes, there are two types of analysis in scientific research: a subjective method and an objective method. The former "characterises [an observer's] spontaneous tendency, and is seen in full vigour in all the early forms of speculation." While engaging in subjective research, one attempts to discern the order of things through "the anticipatory rush of Thought," from which one builds up a hypothesis. In this stage, the subjective method is replaced by the objective method. The goal of the objective method is a verification of what "the anticipatory rush of Thought" leads into. It moulds its conceptions on realities "by closely following the movements of the objects (14-15)." In

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<sup>1</sup> Dickens wrote two satires on scientific meetings as the episodes of *The Mudfog Papers* a few months after the publication of the first chapter of *PP*. The society in this short story, The Mudfog Association, is modelled after The British Association for the Advancement of Science, which held a meeting in York in 1831.

<sup>2</sup> According to James G. Paradis, they lampooned "vulgar pursuits by philistines of mere trivia and novelty" and the idea that "science is a selfless pursuit of knowledge by associating it with vanity and self-aggrandizement" (146, 155).

<sup>3</sup> In his satirical article, Hill exaggeratedly ridicules Arderon's over-scrupulous interest in trivial matters, such as the naming of fish: "We usually call it the Stittleback, a Name of very little Meaning... but he [Arderon] has given us in the Place of it, those of the Banstickle, alias Pricklebag, alias Prickleback; we wonder he did not add... a hundred and fifty Alias's more" (123).

this understanding, the title of Pickwick's thesis implies that his studies are restricted to the initial phase, which calls into question whether his research is really scientific at all.

Pickwick's tendency to jump to conclusions through "the anticipatory rush of Thought" is conspicuously illustrated in his deciphering of the inscription on a stone he finds in chapter 11. Pickwick displays "a variety of ingenious and erudite speculations on the meaning of the inscription" in a pamphlet, which contains "twenty-seven different readings of the inscription" (157). Here, too, his research is based solely on his speculation. Pickwick's ridiculously multiple readings only serve to highlight the error of his interpretation, since his study starts with a rush of thought that the inscription must have been written in distant times. One of the members of the Club named Blotton proves Pickwick's misreading by reporting that he saw the man from whom Pickwick purchased the stone. According to Blotton, though the man thought the stone itself to be ancient, he "solemnly denied the antiquity of the inscription — inasmuch as he represented it to have been rudely carved by himself in an idle mood" (157). Blotton's approach is objectively far more demonstrative than Pickwick's in that he conducts a verification of Pickwick's speculation. At the end of the first chapter, Blotton declares that Pickwick is "a humbug" (19), which causes an uproar in the Club. Although he is forced to admit that he is not serious about this remark, Blotton is correct.<sup>4</sup> Pickwick's dependence on speculation thus reveals a lack of scrutiny in his research.

Moreover, Pickwick also fails at "closely following the movements of the objects," which is an important process in the objective method. Although he introduces himself as an "observer of human nature" (26), his stance is far from the one who deserves this sobriquet. The view from his room in Bardell's house reveals his fundamental attitude toward his study of human nature:

Mr Pickwick's apartments in Goswell Street, although on a limited scale, were not only of a very neat and comfortable description, but peculiarly adapted for the residence of a man of his genius and observation. His sitting-room was the first floor front, his bed-room the second floor front; and thus, whether he were sitting at his desk in the parlour, or standing before the dressing-glass in his dormitory, he had an equal opportunity of contemplating human nature in all the numerous phases it

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<sup>4</sup> Although Bert Hornback claims that Blotton's accusation is not directed at Pickwick's scholarship (71), it seems more likely that Blotton, who must have read Pickwick's thesis, criticises Pickwick's 'scientific' attitude, considering his later harsh criticism of Pickwick's deciphering of the inscription.

exhibits, in that not more populous than popular thoroughfare. (158-59)

He adopts a secure and detached stance, and never involves himself with the crowd. Through sampling snippets of superficial information by observing out of the window, he speculates about human nature in general.

The failure of his observations occurs because of the distance he puts between himself and the objects he encounters. A verbatim record of Pickwick's impressions of Stroud, Rochester, Chatham, and Brompton gives a typical instance of Pickwick's loftiness:

The streets present a lively and animated appearance, occasioned chiefly by the conviviality of the military. It is truly delightful to a philanthropic mind, to see these gallant men, staggering along under the influence of an overflow, both of animal, and ardent spirits; more especially when we remember that the following them about, and jesting with them, affords a cheap and innocent amusement for the boy population. Nothing (adds Mr Pickwick) can exceed their good humour. (30)

Pickwick's report gives nothing but superficial "appearance," and there is no trace of any deep involvement, even though these are the cities where Dickens had nurtured his imagination. By focusing only on the animated appearance of the streets, he regards the towns as convivial and harmonious places.

R. G. Hobbes, however, presents a different view of these same places in the 1820s. According to him, "Chatham has been called the wickedest place in the world," since the soldiers and the sailors indulged in drunkenness and debauchery for "the want of healthful recreation" (qtd. in Allen 39). The episode that Pickwick records just after the passage above serves as an example of that debauchery. In it, a soldier injures a barmaid who refused to serve him any more drink. The next day, he appears again and generously declares that he will forget the matter. No one fails to perceive the soldier's rampageous and arrogant nature, yet Pickwick interprets this event as a story of a forgiving man, since he assumes that the people in this town are good-natured by observing its cheerful façade superficially.

Pickwick's gullibility results from his inclination to pursue appearances from the detached viewpoint of his studies on human nature, though of course people's outward looks do not always reveal their true nature. As James E. Marlow notes, Pickwick believes that there is no slippage between signifier and signified (943), which is why he is repeatedly deceived by Jingle and Job Trotter. Seeing Trotter's tears, Pickwick reads the signs of remorse, whereas

Sam smells something suspicious in Trotter's readiness to cry: "he's got a main in his head as is always turned on" (219). For Pickwick, it never occurs to him that appearances might be deceptive.

Moreover, Pickwick's detached approach also deprives him of the chances to learn lessons from what he encounters. As J. Hillis Miller notes, Pickwick "does not expect what he sees will not involve or change himself" (*Dickens* 7). At Mrs Hunter's public breakfast, he is introduced to Count Smorltork, a renowned foreigner gathering materials for his book on England. Like Pickwick, the Count is always ready to take notes filled with errors because he frequently mishears what others are saying due to his imperfect English. Unable to catch Pickwick's name, he assumes it to be "Pig Vig or Big Vig" (207), which reminds him of a lawyer's wig. Believing mistakenly that Pickwick's name and his job coincide, the Count guesses that Pickwick must be a lawyer. Smorltork is a parody of Pickwick. In front of a person acting as his mirror image, however, Pickwick registers him as one of many odd individuals he meets along his journey.

The interpolated tales that Pickwick hears or reads also do not influence him in the slightest. One night in Cobham, he is absorbed in reading "A Madman's Manuscript," a story involving insanity in an ordinary-looking gentleman. The gap between the man's appearance and his true nature in the story is the very thing that Pickwick fails to observe. The tale could have served as a good lesson for him, but "the gloom which oppressed him" by reading the tale "has disappeared" the next day, and "his thoughts and feelings" become "light and gay as the morning itself" (156). Likewise, "The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client" is linked to Pickwick's situation more closely. In it, a man relates that he lost his wife and son while he was in the debtor's prison. His suffering in the prison is likely to sound horrible to Pickwick since he is in a position to identify himself with this man. When he hears this story, he is already determined to decline to pay compensation to Bardell, who sued Pickwick for breach of promise. That is to say, he will be imprisoned if he loses the case. The story might well remind him of his possible imprisonment. Nevertheless, his interest shifts from the man's tale to the pursuit of Jingle, and he gleans no lesson from the tale. Without a moment for reflection, Pickwick thinks the interpolated tales as a mere diversion, even when they closely relate to his studies and the circumstances into which he has fallen.

As is implied in the opening chapters in this novel, Pickwick's 'scientific' approach is "humbug," as Blotton puts it. He is an incompetent scientist who jumps to the overhasty conclusions based on his inaccurate observation from a stance detached from his objects of study. Nor does he scrutinise the certainty of his wild speculations. Dickens immediately

ceases to evoke the reader's sarcastic laughter at Pickwick, who turns from a pompous pedant to a genial old man who frequently falls into mishaps.<sup>5</sup> Pickwick, however, keeps adopting his 'scientific' approach during his journey, as a result of which he cannot reach the truth nor learn any lesson from the people he encounters. By characterising Pickwick as a 'scientist' who can observe only the surface of life, Dickens comically reveals how erroneous it can be to see things without objective observation.

### III. A 'Dreadful Conjunction of Appearances': Malicious Superficiality of the Lawyers

In this section, I will discuss how Pickwick faces his errors. The arrival of a letter from Dodson and Fogg can be called the turning point of the novel. The letter informs Pickwick of a forthcoming lawsuit against him for a breach of his promise of marriage with Mrs Bardell, who completely misunderstands his words and deeds when he tells her that he hired Sam as a servant. The lawyers attempt to paint him as an enticer of the innocent widow by judging him based only on circumstantial evidence. Embarrassed at the sudden predicament, Pickwick exclaims, "What a dreadful conjunction of appearances!" (244). Henceforth, the conflict between Pickwick's innocence and the lawyers' cunningness becomes clear. Dickens denounces dirty tricks rampant in legal circles by caricaturing the wickedness of the legal professionals.<sup>6</sup> Although they appear to be antithetical characters to Pickwick, there are some similarities between them in terms of their observation methods.

As early as his first meeting with Dodson and Fogg, Pickwick expresses his frustration at the logic of legal professionals. In reply to his inquiry concerning the grounds of complaint against himself, Dodson answers: "You may be an unfortunate man, Sir, or you may be a designing one; but if I were called upon as a jurymen upon my oath, Sir, to express an opinion of your conduct, Sir, I do not hesitate to assert that I should have but one opinion about it" (264). For Dodson and Fogg, what matters is not the truth. Taken at face value, Pickwick has said

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Andrews asserts that Dickens was keen to sense "changes in the moral climate in the mid-1830s, fashions his humour accordingly" (15). Viewed in this way, it is convincing that Dickens discards the satire of science, a popular genre in the 18th century.

<sup>6</sup> In a preface to the cheap edition of the novel (1847), Dickens delightedly reports that legal reforms took place after the publication of the first edition, which have "pared the claws of Messrs Dodson and Fogg" (762).

something intimate to Bardell, has held her in his arms, and has not seen her ever since. By paying attention only to how his conduct appears, the lawyers accuse Pickwick of trifling her.

Even Pickwick's lawyers do not agree with his indignation toward Dodson and Fogg's deviousness. Perker, Pickwick's lawyer, calls them "smart fellows," and gently opposes Pickwick's notion that they are "great scoundrels": "[T]hat's a mere matter of opinion, you know, and we won't dispute about terms; because of course you can't be expected to view these subjects with a professional eye" (409). Here, Perker stresses the difference between Pickwick's perspective and that of the legal professionals'. While Pickwick wants them to realise what is behind his behaviour, "a professional eye" refuses to see through the circumstance. This is also true of Sergeant Snubbin, Pickwick's counsel for the defence in the trial. As he had done in front of Dodson and Fogg, Pickwick expresses his innocence to the sergeant:

'Gentlemen of your profession, Sir,' continued Mr Pickwick, 'see the worst side of human nature — all its disputes, all its ill-will and bad blood, rise up before you.... Conscious as I am, Sir, of the disadvantage of making such a declaration to you, under such circumstances, I have come here, because I wish you distinctly to understand, as my friend Mr Perker has said, that I am innocent of the falsehood laid to my charge; and although I am very well aware of the inestimable value of your assistance, Sir, I must beg to add, that unless you sincerely believe this, I would rather be deprived of the aid of your talents than have the advantage of them.' (413-14)

For Pickwick, Snubbin's full understanding of his real situation is required before obtaining his strong support in the case. Despite his desperate appeal, the sergeant relapses into "a state of abstraction" (414) long before the end of this speech. Not only Dodson and Fogg but also his supporters are indifferent as to whether he is "an unfortunate man" or "a designing one." Thus, Pickwick stubbornly keeps claiming his right to be heard, which Sam calls "Pickwick and principle" (332). Pickwick's innocence stands out in the face of the lawyers' accusations against him.

The hyperbolic rhetoric of the sergeant for the plaintiff named Buzfuz at the trial further illustrates the legal professionals' indifference to the truth. He offers rather strained interpretations of the letters from Pickwick to Bardell, which read, "Garraway's, twelve o'clock — Dear Mrs B. — Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK." and "Dear Mrs B., I shall not be at home till to-morrow. Slow coach.... Dont trouble yourself about the warming-pan" (454). From them, Buzfuz interprets "a mere cover for hidden fire — a mere substitute for some



endearing word or promise” in the words “Tomata sauce” and “warming-pan.”<sup>7</sup> As for “[s]low coach,” the sergeant guesses that it may refer to Pickwick himself since the defendant “has most unquestionably been a criminally slow coach during the whole of this transaction, but whose speed will now be very unexpectedly accelerated, and whose wheels...will very soon be greased” by Bardell (455). In this manner, Buzfuz maliciously distorts what Pickwick meant in his letters by picking up the words without considering their context in order to make Pickwick “the serpent” (451) for his own ends.

Buzfuz’s overinterpretation of the letters appears different from Pickwick’s overhasty conclusion in his superficial observation. Like Pickwick’s, however, the lawyer’s approach is not an attempt to reach the truth through his analysis. Just a glance at the letters as a whole would show that they carry no underlying implications. To make up a story of a wicked seducer, however, he intentionally takes the words in the letter out of context. His reading of the letter recalls Pickwick’s deciphering of the inscription, in which he begins his argument with a false assumption that it must have been written in ancient times; thereafter, he mistakenly interprets the meaning of each letter. Of course, Pickwick does not maliciously distort the meaning of the inscription to suit his assumptions. Yet there is much in common between Buzfuz’s and Pickwick’s attitudes in terms of their exclusive focus on appearances. Pickwick is misunderstood by others in the same way as he misunderstands the world. As well as Dodson and Fogg, Pickwick has observed things with “conjunction of appearances,” if not dreadful. His lost lawsuit and following imprisonment serve as a kind of a punishment for his erroneous observation.

In the debtors’ prison, Pickwick transforms from a superficial observer to a reflective gentleman. He is no longer a sedentary scholar who contemplates “human nature in all the numerous phases” through a window of his house. Proximity to the prisoners shows him the grim realities that his superficial observations had failed to detect. On the first day of his imprisonment, Pickwick observes the prisoners “with great curiosity and interest,” which gives the impression that he is still a visitor rather than a prisoner. From a distanced viewpoint, he “peep[s]” (546) into the nature of the prisoners. After witnessing a drunken revelry of the prisoners’, however, he concludes that imprisonment for debt is scarcely a punishment at all for those who usually spend their days in public houses. Undeceived by the

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<sup>7</sup> William S. Lane introduces an entry of John Adolphus’ diary written in 1840, in which Dickens himself explains to him why tomato sauce can be a sexual implication: “Gentlemen, I need not tell you that the popular name for tomato is the love-apple!... The outpouring of love and tender-feelings implied by tomato sauce cannot be misunderstood” (43).

lively appearance of the revelry, Pickwick sees through the moral corruption of the prisoners. This is an unusual instance where his view is correct. Upon arriving at the Fleet, Pickwick's erroneous observation begins to be corrected. Furthermore, Pickwick now fully understand the sufferings of confinement, given his daily proximity to this painful aspect of prison life. The Chancery prisoner says to Pickwick on his deathbed, "My heart broke when my child died, and I could not even kiss him in his little coffin" (594). The man in "The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client" also has his son die ahead of him. While the tale made Pickwick drowsy, he now deeply sympathises with the dying prisoner and says that this man has been "slowly murdered by the law" (593). In the Fleet, Pickwick truly observes human nature for the first time.

Faced with the gloomy aspects of prison life, Pickwick gradually becomes reluctant to mix with the prisoners, and his observations change their character accordingly:

The great body of the prison population appeared to be Mivins, and Smangle, and the parson, and the butcher, and the leg, over and over, and over again. There was the same squalor, the same turmoil and noise, the same general characteristics in every corner; in the best and the worst alike. The whole place seemed restless and troubled; and the people were crowding and flitting to and fro, like the shadows in an uneasy dream. (610)

As the repetition of the term "the same" suggests, he does not jump to singularities within the prisoners' appearances. Instead, he understands "the body" of the Fleet. This is not a conclusion he attains through the superficial observation. By deeply involving himself in prison life, he sees beneath its surface, and grasps its underlying features of the place. Eventually, Pickwick decides to confine himself to his cell to avoid confronting these terrible sights, saying "I have seen enough" (610). Although Steven Marcus sees Pickwick's self-confinement as his willing disengagement to retain his innocence (47), it seems that Pickwick's avoidance of personal contact in the prison results from a painful lesson learned in terms of his attitude toward observations. He has learned how superficially he had studied human nature, and his curiosity in humanity is no longer awakened in the same way as before.

In the closing chapter, Pickwick declares the dissolution of The Pickwick Club. His last words in the book suggest some element of reflection on his erroneous former stance toward observation:

“I shall never regret having devoted the greater part of two years to mixing with different varieties and shades of different character, frivolous as my pursuit of novelty may have appeared to many. Nearly the whole of my previous life having been devoted to business and the pursuit of wealth, numerous scenes of which I had no previous conception have dawned upon me — I hope to the enlargement of my mind, and the improvement of my understanding.” (749)

While expressing his satisfaction with his tour, Pickwick at the same time realises the “frivolous” nature of his “pursuit of novelty” at this stage. An overhasty leaping to the peculiar appearances had led him to misunderstand the world, which finally put him to the Fleet. Throughout the book, Pickwick is frequently compared to the sun. On the first day of his journey, for example, Pickwick “burst[s] like another sun from his slumbers” (20). The rays of light emanating from him, however, only illuminate novelties, as his attention is solely focused on them. It is not until he learns the superficiality of his pleasure jaunt that he can distinguish “shades of different character.” When his understanding of human nature is corrected, his journey, which is motivated by his attraction to superficial novelties, necessarily ends.

#### IV. Sam's Limited 'Wisdom': Willing Persistence to Appearances

So far, I have argued how Pickwick's superficial observation is corrected. Dickens, however, does not reject the approach of observing things only on the surface. In *PP*, there is another superficial observer, Sam. He is always delighted with the novelties and singularities of the street. His significance in casual conversation with Pickwick and other characters at the trial, and in the Fleet suggests that Dickens acknowledges that superficial observation plays a key role.

When considering Sam's extraordinary imagination, it is always death, murders, and corpses that occur to him. The following comments are typical examples of his fondness for the grotesque:

“No, no; reg'lar rotation, as Jack Ketch said, ven he tied the men up” (131)

“It’s over, and can’t be helped, and that’s one consolation, as they always says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man’s head off” (307)

“There; now ve look compact and comfortable, as the father said ven he cut his little boy’s head off, to cure him o’ squittin” (370).

The selection of anecdotes he occasionally shares with Pickwick, such as the story of a butcher who by accident puts himself into a sausage grinder, also reflects his grim imagination. Sam enjoys infusing dreadful elements into everyday scenes. Cruel as they appear, Sam’s remarks do not suggest his callousness toward the fate of others, as John Carey asserts that “the forms of death involved are carefully selected for their extravagant improbability. No one could be aided by this brand of humour to see everyday death and suffering as part of the human comedy” (70). Michael Hollington also regards Sam’s remarks as a mere play on words, “a revitalising of stale everyday clichés” (37). Sam enjoys colouring his explanations of otherwise monotonous circumstances with his fertile leaps of imagination.

Sam’s insight into poverty and oysters strikingly illustrates his tendency to neglect cause and effect of things willingly. When walking with Pickwick, Sam suddenly talks about the curious relationship between the oyster stalls and the poor:

“It’s a wery remarkable circumstance, Sir,” said Sam, “that poverty and oysters always seem to go together.”

“I don’t understand you, Sam,” said Mr Pickwick.

“What I mean, sir,” said Sam, “is, that the poorer a place is, the greater call there seems to be for oysters. Look here, Sir; here’s a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses — the street’s lined vith’em. Blessed if I don’t think that ven a man’s wery poor, he rushes out of his lodgings, and eats oysters in reg’lar desperation.” (294)

Hearing Sam’s observation, Pickwick feels pleased with these “remarkable facts,” and decides to “make a note” of them (295). He regards the number of the oyster stalls in the poorer area of the city as if it were a strange phenomenon in nature. Here lies the difference between Pickwick and Sam. It seems unlikely that Sam, who has witnessed every aspect of the urban life since his father “pitched [him] neck and crop into the world” (212), does not know that oysters used to be one of the most popular foods in the poorer parts of urban areas due to their low price.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Pickwick, Sam consciously directs his attention to the surface of

reality despite his accurate knowledge of its underlying elements. While Pickwick's shallowness derives from his ignorance of the world, Sam knowingly engages in superficial observation.

It is also one of the features of Sam's observations that his perspective is completely freed from conventions. On his way to Leadenhall Market, his eyes become fixed on a picture that reminds him of the approaching Saint Valentine's Day:

The particular picture... was a highly coloured representation of a couple of human hearts skewered together with an arrow, cooking before a cheerful fire, while a male and female cannibal in modern attire, the gentleman being clad in a blue coat and white trousers, and the lady in a deep red pelisse with a parasol of the same, were approaching the meal with hungry eyes.... A decidedly indelicate young gentleman, in a pair of wings and nothing else, was depicted as superintending the cooking... and the whole formed a 'valentine'.... (431)

Dickens describes the picture as if it represents cannibalism, and this is why it attracts Sam. However, hearts pierced by naked cupids' arrows were typical images associated with Valentine's Day. A church in the background, symbolising future matrimony, was also frequently depicted in cards (Miller, *Topographies* 111-12). For a worldly-wise man like Sam, the theme of the picture must have been self-evident, no matter how crudely it may have been drawn. Yet he prefers to think of it as a cannibalistic scene. Instead of immediately understanding that it represents Valentine in light of its conventional composition, he welcomes the sudden infusion of heterogeneous element into the city.

In Sam's persistence of adopting a superficial perspective to take pleasure in observation in the streets, he bears some similarity with Boz. In "Seven Dials," for example, Boz comically depicts the residents by focusing only on the outward appearances of the titular area, calling it "the region of song and poetry" (70), though this area, in fact, was known as a notorious slum. Like Sam, Boz is an observer who is familiar with every nook and cranny of the city. While understanding what the place really is, Boz is attracted by its jolly appearance which stimulates his imagination. Sam is a successor of Boz in terms of his pleasure-seeking attitude and willing refusal to acknowledge the reality underlying his observation.

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<sup>8</sup> According to T. W. Hill, oysters cost only eight pence a dozen in the 1830s (142).

Furthermore, Sam is not a character who amuses the reader only through an extended digression from the central topic of each chapter. More than that, his role in the novel becomes more significant in the court and in the following events, which shadows a gloomy aspect in Pickwick's journey. Buzfuz's line of inquiry, which succeeded in obtaining a testimony incriminating to a defendant in the case of Pickwick and Winkle, does not work well in the case of Sam:

“You were in the passage and yet saw nothing of what was going forward. Have you a pair of eyes, Mr Weller?”

“Yes, I have a pair of eyes,” replied Sam, “and that's just it. If they was a pair o' patent double million magnifyin' gas microscopes of hextra power, p'raps I might be able to see through a flight o'stairs and a deal door; but bein' only eyes you see, my wision's limited.” (464)

Sam's reply evokes the spectators' titter, and Buzfuz looks “particularly foolish” (464) in this scene. Sam's literal interpretation is closely related to his observation of the streets. In Sam's understanding, the “double million magnifyin' gas microscopes” are expected not to enlarge things to see them more clearly, but to allow the observer to see that which is invisible. Similarly, the sergeant tries to elicit from Sam's explanation of the hidden ‘truth,’ which is, of course, their far-fetched interpretation of the prosecution. Sam's limited “wision,” however, cannot be characterised as some form of x-ray. His refusal to surmise ‘truth’ from what he sees protects him from falling into the sergeant's cunning traps.

In the sergeant's examination of Sam as a witness, as Sally Ledger puts it, who is ‘wise’ and who is ‘stupid’ is radically called into question. Pickwick has been powerless before the machinations of the lawyers, but Sam's “carnavalesque disruption of the legal process” (49-51) nullifies the force of the law.<sup>9</sup> Sam also succeeds in humiliating Dodson and Fogg, while their deviousness is exposed in public when he is asked to explain the plaintiff's “high praise” of their “honourable conduct,” to which Sam responds, “they [Bardell and her friends] said what a wery gen'rous thing it was o' them to have taken up the case on spec, and to charge nothin' at all for costs unless they got 'em out of Mr Pickwick” (465). Like when

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<sup>9</sup> Ledger's reference to carnivalesque in terms of Sam's fool-like role in a court evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque laughter, which is defined as a counterforce against the “serious aspects of class culture” that tend to be “official and authoritative” and “always contain an element of fear or of intimidation” (90).

Buzfuz selfishly reads Pickwick's implications in his letters to Bardell, Sam consciously misunderstands the meaning of "honourable conduct" by separating the phrase from the context of Buzfuz's question. Sam comically retaliates against the lawyers instead of Pickwick. Finally, Buzfuz gives up drawing an advantageous testimony from Sam, saying "It's perfectly useless, my Lord, attempting to get at any evidence through the impenetrable stupidity of this witness" (465). It is not Sam but the lawyers that expose their "stupidity." After all, Pickwick cannot be a well-matched opponent against the lawyers. His final accusation against Dodson and Fogg, in which he says that they are "mean, rascally, pettifogging robbers," (708) has no effect at all, and they are reported to have continued flourishing as "the sharpest of the sharp" (753) in the last chapter. Instead of Pickwick, Sam becomes their counterweight. He causes a role reversal between the accused and those in authority. By evoking the spectators' laughter, he undermines the dignity of the lawyers.

Sam's self-imprisonment also fools legal procedures. After Pickwick exempts him from any obligations during his imprisonment, Sam borrows money from his father and lets him file a suit against him so that he is jailed for not paying his debt. Solomon Pell, a lawyer in the Insolvent Court, immediately completes a legal procedure for Sam's imprisonment. Although Pell is described as "the legal authority" (574) who boasts of having been an intimate friend of the late Lord Chancellor, the idea of Sam's made-up arrest amuses him so much that he cheerfully builds up a case on circumstantial evidence, which is closer to the tricks of Dodson and Fogg. The more his capability as a lawyer is touted, the more the authority of the legal profession becomes weakened. On his way to the prison, the Wellers walk "arm in arm" (581) into the prison as if there were no boundary existed between the outside world and the Fleet. The lawyers take great pains to prove the guilts of the defendants by using sophistries, distorting facts, and intentionally making false and misleading speculations. The Wellers' happy mood makes a mockery of their efforts. The father is delighted to play the role of "the inexorable creditor" (581), and the son his victim. By changing the lawsuit into a make-believe game, Sam takes away its seriousness.

Even in the debtor's prison, Sam never loses his light-heartedness, which is contrasting to Pickwick. The uncomfortable cell, the mental suffering due to confinement, and the prisoners' moral corruption, all of which contribute to teach Pickwick valuable life lessons, are simply "occasion[s] for taking pleasure" (Bowen 69) for Sam. He immediately settles in as if "he had been bred in the prison, and his whole family had vegetated therein for three generations" (586). After taking "a refreshing draught of the beer," he bestows "a Platonic wink" (595) on a young lady, as he previously did upon a "healthy-looking servant girl" (308) in the street.

While the drunkards look disgusting to Pickwick, Sam good-humouredly negotiates with them in a whistling shop, where gin is smuggled into the prison. In the Fleet, there are many victims of brutal laws, and Pickwick is also subjected to the grim reality of life. Throughout his imprisonment, however, the harmful environment of the prison does not affect Sam at all.

Thus, Sam succeeds in getting the better of the evil characters with his “impenetrable” superficiality. Moreover, Sam’s easy-going adaptation to the prison life mocks the otherwise potentially devastating influences of imprisonment. To sum up, Sam deconstructs Pickwick’s terrible experiences, which are gloomy but necessary events for the correction of the latter’s understanding of the world. Sam’s role in *PP* is not limited to amusing the reader with his fantastic leaps of imagination. By presenting a comical perspective to the things Pickwick takes seriously, Sam keeps the jovial atmosphere of the novel from submitting to the grimness of reality.

## V. Conclusion

As is discussed above, Pickwick’s ‘scientific’ attention focuses only on the surface of reality. His innocent mistakes are comically described, but his superficial observation blinds him to life’s realities. The legal professionals’ way of accusing Pickwick is the wicked counterpart to Pickwick’s own observation. Analysed in the similar manner of his, Pickwick is punished for his superficiality and learns the proper way of observation through imprisonment. Viewed in this way, *PP* can be read as an old man’s *bildungsroman*. For Dickens, *PP* is his first attempt to write a novel. In folding up “a mere series of adventures” with “no artfully interwoven or ingeniously complicated plot” (6)<sup>10</sup>, Dickens chose to describe Pickwick’s ‘growth’ from a superficial observer, which is necessary but at the same time commonplace development of a novel.

Sam’s superficial observation, however, adds another layer to the novel. Unlike Pickwick, Sam’s overlooking of their true nature of street life is not due to ignorance. Despite his ample knowledge of the streets of London, he consciously avoids “seeing beneath the surface,” and indulges in a grotesque associations. In this respect, he inherits Boz’s characteristics. Even

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<sup>10</sup> This is the citation from preface for the first edition of the novel (1837). Admitting clumsiness of the plot, Dickens justifies himself by claiming that “the same objection has been made to the works of some of the greatest novelists in the English language” (6).



in the court and the Fleet, his pleasure-seeking attitude does not change. With his light-heartedness, he deconstructs the life lessons Pickwick learns from his painful experiences, which illuminates the bleakest parts of the novel. A novice writer's clumsy attempt to knit up a desultory plot is saved from becoming too monotonous and didactic by Sam's limited "wision."

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